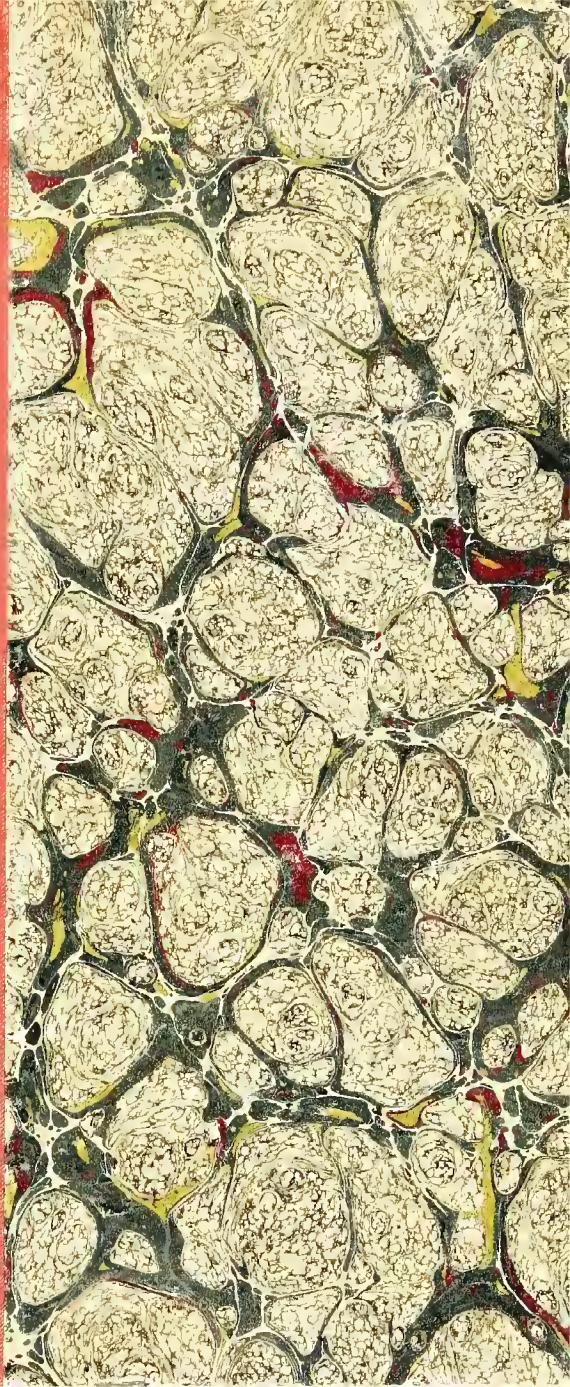


TILTON — The First Don Quixote

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The
First Don Quixote

The First Don Quixote

or

Ponce de Leon's Voyage to the Fountain of Youth

An Historical Ballad

APROPOS OF THE ANNEXATION OF PORTO RICO TO THE
UNITED STATES

WITH PREFACE, NOTES, AND APPENDIX

BY

THEODORE TILTON

'Even the historian takes great liberties with facts'

SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS

Paris

BRENTANO

37 AVENUE DE L'OPÉRA

1899

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PREFATORY.



THE early Spanish annals of the West Indies (like the late American exploits in those troubled waters!) were not lacking in marvels.

But be it remembered that marvels are not fables.

A marvel is not a marvel, if not true: a fable is not a fable, if not false.

Now, therefore, as 'truth is stranger than fiction,' the following West Indian tale—which is nothing but an unpretentious ballad of Porto Rico and Ponce de Leon—need not awaken (even in the drowsiest reader) any startling incredulity.

Nevertheless, the altering of an old and familiar chapter of history into a new and totally different sequence and conclusion—changing the incidents under a pretence of improving the moral—is an act of literary iconoclasm for which the offending scribe may be deemed by the keepers of the public conscience to deserve the bastinado.

Know all men by these presents, therefore, that the quintessential truth—as distilled into this appended (and modernized) narrative—is derived from a source which had not been opened to those early Spanish chroniclers from whom we long ago received the tale in part, but who never had the means of rendering it to us in full.

‘Mañana, mañana!’ was their excuse: ‘to-morrow, to-morrow!’

They never boasted that their meagre digest—such as we have it from Peter Martyr and the rest of them—was to be the last word that could be said on the subject; but, on the contrary, they seem to have anticipated that a fuller disclosure would be forthcoming at a much later time.

Of course, a ‘much later time’ has already come: and yet the Earth’s latest and final time of all—when whatsoever is hidden shall be made plain—is not yet at hand.

Meanwhile, and until history shall cease to be ‘philosophy teaching by example,’ probably the strange behaviour of the decrepit yet indomitable Ponce de Leon—making in his old age a half-year’s voyage in search of a Fountain of Perpetual Youth—will remain a unique incident which, unless better explained than hitherto, will continue to excite the irony and persiflage of mankind.

Nevertheless, in each of all the four quarters of the globe, the genial mockery which Ponce always elicits as the monumental mooncalf of the human race, is so invariably good-natured that it may be called ‘all honey, and no sting.’ He made many enemies in his own day; but he has never made a single one since. On the other hand, even his snifty and pooh-poohing critics cannot help loving him for his sincerity, while smiling at him for his simplicity. He has already figured for four centuries as the whole world’s favourite; and he may possibly contribute to ‘the gaiety of nations’ for forty generations to come.

Meanwhile the colonial penchant which the recent Hispano-American war has naturally aroused among our people—and which finds in Porto Rico its first fixed point of patriotic localization—has consequently uplifted the grotesque and fascinating figure of old Ponce de Leon into

a new light before the American mind : for whereas we had previously been accustomed to honour this eccentric hero mainly as the discoverer of Florida, and as the founder of St. Augustine, we have just been reminded—by the annexation of Porto Rico to the United States—that Ponce de Leon was not merely our earliest Floridian ‘pre-emptioner,’ but likewise our earliest Porto Rican ‘home-steadier.’

Yea, verily, this intrepid companion and survivor of Columbus was the original conqueror, colonizer, and governor of our now Yankee island of Porto Rico ;—or (as it was then called) Boriquenne ;—a name which our ‘Colonial Secretary’ at Washington (when we have one) ought to restore.

Furthermore, on the morning of October 17, 1898, when the Stars and Stripes, in the ceremony of annexation, were hoisted over the custom-house and harbour of St. Juan de Porto Rico, the shadow of the new flag happened to fall upon the identical old anchorage-ground where the grizzle-bearded Captain Ponce began—and where also he ended—his world-famous and youth-seeking voyage.

This is a felicitous instance of what is styled ‘the romance of history.’

Think of it !

In this recently Yankeeified ship-channel of ours—now marked by a patented bell-buoy that rings warningly at the threat of every dangerous wave—Ponce de Leon, without the benefit of a warning of any sort, weighed anchor and set sail as a venerable ‘hidalgo’—occupying the office of an ‘alcayde,’ or governor—a potentate full of years, cares, labours, and infirmities—in the full faith of flinging off his burden of age by enchantment, and of finding himself restored, in one magical moment, to the vigour, pith, and rose-flush of his youth !

Moreover, it was in this same old Spanish roadstead—now no longer yellow-flagged, but starred-and-striped—that His Venerable Excellency, the same Don Ponce (whom we must hereafter catalogue among our earliest American governors !) returned to drop his anchor, and to furl his sails—in order to take home with him to his gubernatorial log-house in Porto Rico, after his long wanderings in the Bahamas—not his youth restored!—but his head whiter, and his heart wearier, than ever before !

So our new island is not without its mystical memories of ‘Ye olden Time.’

Of course such memories—together with the moralizations which they suggest—cannot but tickle the very midriff and marrow of ‘The Universal Yankee Nation’ :—a people who, down from the very day of their original landing on Plymouth Rock in 1620, have never yet been so feverishly practical as not to be, at the same time, profoundly introspective—and who excel all modern nations in reverence for the Past.

A cargo of tea—thrown overboard in the Year of Grace 1773—has sanctified Boston harbour ever since : and, in like manner, there is now a whimsical satisfaction throughout all Yankeeland in reflecting that our new West Indian port-of-entry is consecrated by a similarly historical and sentimental reminiscence, dating still further back, to Anno Domini 1513.

Quondam Castilian—henceforth Americanesque—our beautiful Island of Boriquenne is the greenest fragment (thus far) of Our Great Republic, and may be dotingly nicknamed the Little Emerald of the Great Antilles.

But there is nothing greener in this tropical sea-garden than the green memory of Ponce de Leon—the hero of the Porto Rican expedition to the Fountain of Youth.

By the ‘comity of nations,’ this historical incident—as

a piece of literary property—is now transferred (somewhat like a copyright) from Spain to the United States ; so that we may regard the inimitable tale as henceforth one of our own national annals.

Is this a view unwarranted by the ‘Protocol’?

Suppose, for a moment, that the recent war had ended ‘the other way!’—and that the Dons had invaded, subdued, seized, sequestered, and administered Uncle Sam’s ‘eminent domain!’

Would not our Castilian conquerors have thereby become the national proprietors of George Washington’s Hatchet?—of Davy Crockett’s Coon?—of Rip Van Winkle’s twenty-year Nap in the Catskills?—of Connecticut’s sacred Blue-Laws, forbidding a man to kiss his wife on the Sabbath?—and of the Mayflower’s Family-Bible, the biggest book in the world, with its genealogical register of ‘an hundred and forty and four thousand’ of the ‘first families’ of our ‘best society’?

By the fortune of war, all these literary relics are still left to us—with one other added thereunto : to wit, Ponce de Leon’s Fountain of Perennial Youth !

About sixty years ago, Washington Irving—‘the Father of American Literature,’ as he is now fondly called—made over to his grateful countrymen a kind of semi-lease of the Alhambra—where he had lived like a Spanish grandee ; that is, in a style of great dignity, and little cost ! By this literary bequest to us, this memorable monument in Granada has ever since been in our quasi-possession as Americans—at least for our intellectual usufruct. In like manner, by a more absolute lien, title, charter, and transfer, Ponce de Leon’s Fountain of Youth is now and henceforth to be entirely and inalienably our own.

Let us not fail to value our newly-acquired literary

inheritance at its full preciousness: for this Porto Rican escapade by Ponce is one of the few and rare cases in which lovers of letters are able to find, at one and the same moment, in an actual and matter-of-fact episode of human history, also an idyllic and incomparable fancy of the human mind.

This consideration is important: for, from a literary point of view, the 'perfect stories' are not only few in number, but are usually more or less fabulous, allegorical, and unreal: such, for instance, as Noah's Ark—Jason and the Argo—Sinbad the Sailor—the Flying Dutchman—Santa Claus—and Robinson Crusoe: but, on the other hand, Ponce de Leon's romantic quest of the Fountain of Youth—which is the equal of any of these as a fascinating tale—is at the same time an indisputable fact.

But our Poncian compendium or summary, as we inherit it from the sixteenth century, is like everything else that has ever been Spanish: it is no longer 'up to date.'

Therefore the following ballad or epopee—which is a wholly modern version of this antiquated and comical Odyssey of the Gulf Stream—may seriously claim to give the latest ascertainable particulars of Ponce de Leon's ocean-pilgrimage to the shrine of the Elixir of Life.

T. T.

PONCE DE LEON'S FOUNT OF YOUTH.

A NEW VERSION.



'These are not natural events; they strengthen
From strange to stranger.—Say, how came you hither?'

ALONSO, in *The Tempest*, Act v, sc. 1.

I.

THIS mad and merry tale, my gentle friends,
Is told so often that you call it trite;
But you shall find, before my ballad ends,
That former bards have never told aright
The droll adventures of the hoary-headed Knight.
An ancient city, built of ocean-shells¹,
Is called his monument, yet lacks his name;
And now he needs a chronicle that tells
His queer exploits, and celebrates his fame,
Yet makes him not a butt of ridicule and shame.
You know that in a tiny Floating Isle,
That once lay anchored off San Salvador²,
A Magic Fountain bubbled for a while,
Which, though perhaps it sparkles now no more,
Yet wrought a strange enchantment in the days of yore.
It gave to wrinkled age the bloom of youth,—
Nor can the miracle be now denied,
For Pope de' Medici³, who knew its truth,
Took pains to have the fountain certified,
And would himself have drunk the waters, but he died.

¹ St. Augustine is the oldest city in the United States, and its finest edifices are not of stone but of coquina.

² The Guanahani of Columbus, 1492.

³ Leo X (1513-1521).

The oldest cripples, half a century lame,
Who just could hobble to the fountain's brink—
No matter who they were, nor whence they came—
Were in a jiffy (or as quick as wink)
Transformed to youth and vigour by a single drink.

This Magic Well, this fountain of delight,
Was guarded by a Witch—a griesly Crone
Who in a cave of corals (pink and white,
And paved with madrepores) had dwelt alone
Till she was now the oldest Sybil ever known.

But though this ancient warder of the well
Had never drunk of it, to make her young—
Yet every root around it felt its spell,
And never-fading blooms above it hung,
Nor could the mosses wither which it flowed among.

The isle had once been anchored, I have said;
But nought could hold it fast against the tide;
It slipped its moorings, and away it sped;
And being small—and hard to be espied—
It wandered undetected in the ocean wide.

So though it was the Eden of the Sea,—
Yet as to where this grove of beauty lay,
The braggart Indian bards of Caribee,
In boasting of the Fount, could never say;
And strangers, sailing thither, had to guess their way.

And here begins the tale I wish to tell;
Not the old empty story told before—
Of how the seeker never found the well—
But how he found it; and how furthermore . . .
Yet wait and listen . . . there is wonderment in store!

II.

Old Ponce de Leon—with some younger men,
To whom he dared not make his purpose plain—
Sailed in his caravel from Boriquenne¹,
In faith of finding in the Spanish Main
This lost yet loveliest link of the Lucayan Chain².
For now that Ponce was fabulously rich,
And had an Indian province of his own,
His years were verging to an age for which—
With its infirmities—no cure was known,
Except the water of the Magic Fount alone.
To this old warrior—bred a prince's page³—
Schooled from his youth to knighthood and command—
Tender in friendship, tempest-like in rage—
For years a thunderer, shaking sea and land;—
How sweet and dreamy was the voyage he now had planned !
Perched on his poop above the spray and spume,
Watching the surges as they splashed and swirled,
He sat and puffed the pensive weed whose fume—
Though strange and novel then—yet since has curled
In ever-widening wreaths around the rolling world.
Between his whiffs he reckoned up his wealth :
'I own,' thought he, 'the Ocean and the Shore!—
I need but Life and Time, but Youth and Health!—
For now, with these, I could accomplish more
Than any mortal ever dared attempt before.
'But what to me is all my high degree,
Or what my buccaneering and its gains,
Or what my lordship of the Carib Sea,—
If in my hips, and thighs, and joints, and reins
I have a chronic ganglion of sciatic pains?

¹ Now called Porto Rico.

² The Spanish designation of the Bahamas.

³ Page to the Crown-Prince of Arragon, who by his marriage with Queen Isabella of Castile, became King of Spain.

'So, O ye breezes, louder be your blast !

And, O ye billows, higher be ye rolled !

Till I on that enchanted coast be cast

Where these, my silver hairs, shall turn to gold,—
And this, my rack of bones, shall be no longer old !'

Thus mused this hoary Neptune of a rover,

This wrinkled Viceroy of a zone and clime,

Who vowed to hunt the whole Lucayas over,

Till he could juggle against Fate and Time—

And, with a presto ! change Old Age to Youth and Prime.

III.

You tell me that old Ponce was self-deceived ;

That his delusion proved him to be daft ;

That Youth, if lost, can never be retrieved ;

And that my Captain in his wandering craft

Made but a madman's cruise, at which the world has laughed.

I pick your gauntlet up ! . . . I volunteer

(With proud ambition in this breast of mine)

To vindicate his seeming mad career,

In happy hope to make his wisdom shine

(And mine with his) from Line to Pole, from Pole to Line.

IV.

Now every mystery has a why ? or whence ?

Even the fickle breeze hath stable laws . . .

'It bloweth where it listeth' . . . Men of sense

Thus learn the ways of winds by watching straws ;

And as for other tempests, Woman is the cause !

Ponce was in love !—but as his agéd passion

Was flouted by a young Señora's frown ;

And as knight-errantry was then in fashion ;

He went to win for her—and to lay down—

Low at her feet—a treasure richer than a crown !

O what a gift to touch a virgin's pride!—
 To thrill her heart!—to warm her chilly breast!—
 For as a Bridegroom, Ponce would give his Bride
A youth's first love!—the love that is the best!—
 As every woman knows who puts it to the test.

v.

Of all the sailors who have ever sailed
 Since first the Earth had vessels or a sea,—
 Old Ponce, so old that now he ached and ailed
 With metatarsal gout from toe to knee,
 Is the immortal Ancient Mariner for me!

Some say his ship was called the 'Trinidad,'
 (For Ponce was pious): some, the 'Flying Horse,'
 (From foaming at the mouth): but *I* have had
 The vessel's name traced to a likelier source:
 She was the 'Margarita'—(Ponce's 'pearl,' of course¹).

This natty caravel of ninety tons,
 Though now (to *us*) she seems absurdly small,
 Yet carried culverins and other guns,
 With kegs of powder and relays of ball,
 Together also with a coracle or yawl;

Or I should rather say a birch canoe,
 Or wicker wherry of the Carib sort—
 A tiny boat, not big enough for two,
 Which Ponce could paddle, seated on a thwart,
 And go alone in, when he wished to make a port.

For with his mighty secret in his breast,
 Which his companions were forbid to share,
 He had to make a sly and stealthy quest
 (As if he sought the nest-egg of a mare!)
 And so he always went ashore a solitaire.

¹ The name 'Margarita' signifies a 'pearl.'

These errands of the Captain were mysterious;
And yet the crew, who saw him go and come,
Dared never ask a leader so imperious
Whether he went for amber, or for gum;
Nor did they care,—for they had hydromel and rum.

Some argued noisily, with shallow minds,
That he was baulked in seeking sands of gold,—
For every day, with oaths of forty kinds,
He cursed the weather, were it hot or cold,
And cursed his gout, and cursed himself for growing old.

But all the while, his merry mates could see
That though no boisterous wave could be so rude,
And no complaining wind so gruff as he,
Yet Ponce's temper had its halcyon mood—
As hopefully he ploughed the salty solitude.

VI.

Up from the ocean many a hidden hill
He saw arise—till from its flowery steep
(As from some river-garden of Seville,
Or sea-cliff bower of Cadiz) there would creep
Sweet odours of the land to reach him on the deep.

And not by day alone his sails were set,
For then the ocean's lofty roof at night
Was hung with all the lamps that stud it yet,
And also with those Pleiads once so bright,
That twinkled long ago, but now are lost to sight.

Almighty lobsters—infinite of claw;
Sharks—of a finite (yet a monstrous) fin;
Whales—and the Great Sea-Serpent:—these he saw,
But these he now no more delighted in:—
For all his thoughts were on the prize he hoped to win.

It was not Youth alone he sought so dearly,
It was not Youth alone, but Love beside !
His case was plain—he understood it clearly :
He wooed a damsel—he had been denied :
But give him back his Youth, and he would win his bride !
I love a lover !—and old Ponce, I say,
Was the most generous lover ever known !—
Willing, for Love's dear sake, to give away
His whole identity of flesh and bone !—
A sacrifice unique !—wherein he stands alone !

VII.

I long to tell you to what length in leagues,
And to what wearier length (not marked in miles
But in laborious days and their fatigues)
This vilipended victim of your smiles
Pursued his secret search among those Thousand Isles¹.
At every isle, on landing all alone,
He dragged his wherry up the grinding shore,
And hunted for the Cavern of the Crone,
In hope to bribe or bully or implore
The wrinkled-visaged Witch to let him drink galore.
Sometimes his breath would fail him in the heat ;
Sometimes a bramble-bush would scratch his eyes ;
Sometimes a snake would curl about his feet ;—
But these were dangers he could well despise,
Compared with the mosquitoes—of appalling size !
For in that lonesome archipelago
No last surviving naked Indian dwelt,
Whereon these gallinippers still could show
How they could gallinip the human pelt :
So Ponce got every blow which these assassins dealt.

¹ They have been charted to the number of 926 ; and except the few of habitable size, they are mostly wild and virgin to this day ; nor are springs of fresh water, even in the greenest of them, easy for ships' crews to find.

And O the rain-clouds! They would rush together,
And blacken all at once the bluest sky,
And drench him with a sudden change of weather,
Till not a stitch upon him would be dry,
And he would look a very scare-crow, or a guy!

But with his noble face all burnt to bronze,
With lips all blistered, with a nose all peeled,
This most indomitable don of dons—
Through horrors worse than of a battlefield—
Probed every nook wherein he thought the Fount concealed.

VIII.

It was before the time of telescopes,
And Ponce de Leon had no optic glass,
But trusted to his eyes—and to his hopes,
And not a spot of greenness did he pass
Without a scrutiny of every tuft of grass.

And since such Yuccas¹ he had never seen—
No, not in any verdant vale in Spain—
He asked himself, 'What gives them such a green
It cannot certainly be common rain—
It is immortal water trickling through the plain.

'And find it, by Saint Tibb! I must and will!
How can a fountain keep from being found?
Its living springs must have a running rill
That soon or late shall burst above the ground,
And spill the sparkling waters everywhere around.

'Or if the runnel never breaks the sod,
But hides and burrows where no eye can see,
Can I not cut me a divining-rod?
Will not a twig from a Witch-hazel tree
Suffice to lead me where the lurking waters be?

¹ Yucca is the Haytian name for the grass known as 'Spanish bayonet.'

‘And I will gulp them till my wrinkled skin,
That now is rougher than a hedgehog’s hide,
Shall be as smooth upon my brow and chin
As when I started in my youth and pride
With old Columbus for the planet’s hither side !

‘And *my* discovery shall by far outshine
The else unequalled glory of his own ;
For such a wonder-working well as mine—
Creating man anew in flesh and bone—
Shall be a shrine of pilgrimage from every zone !

‘The Floating Isle shall then no more go free,
For I will hitch it with a copper chain,
And moor it so securely in the sea,
That while the Heavens shall last it shall remain,
To be an Earthly Harbour free from death and pain !

‘Meanwhile, though good Queen Isabel is dead,
And though King Ferdinand is sick to die¹,
Yet *I* shall never make the grave my bed,
Nor ever bid the merry world good-bye ;
For Death shall never hit me, though his arrows fly !

‘And O what will my Pearl of Women think,
When she beholds me young on my return ?
Will not her eyeballs stare until they blink ?
Will not her frosty heart catch fire and burn ?
And is *a youth’s first love* a gift that she will spurn ?’

IX.

It was the season of those steady gales
That never change their course the summer through,
But hum their music to the swelling sails,
And rush the vessel through the briny blue,
And challenge the delighted dolphins to pursue.

¹ The Queen died in 1504 ; the King, twelve years later.

And Ponce, who knew that where the dolphins dive,
The ship is near a hospitable shore,
Wished that old Christopher were still alive
To hail those happy harbingers once more
That welcomed the World-Finder to San Salvador.

'Alas for Christopher! But by the Rood!
'I swear,' cried Ponce, 'I will not die as he—
The victim of a King's ingratitude—
Old and in chains! I will be young and free!
And as for Kings, let all such ingrates cease to be!'

And Ponce, in raving thus, was not a fool,
But proved himself prophetically wise;
For Kings have had their day; and kingly rule
(A curse to nations) hides its head and dies
Heaven-blasted in a Western World of freer skies!

And I, as Ponce's bard, predict a time
When not in any hemisphere, or zone,
Or coast, or isle, or habitable clime,
Will there be any King on any Throne;
For all the spacious planet shall be Freedom's own!

X.

But to my tale!—which seems to lag and loiter
And limp as languidly as Ponce indeed;
Yet as my Hero had both gout and goitre,
I beg that his adventures may proceed
Without the hurry of uncomfortable speed.

Ponce was himself impatient—heroes *are*;
And so, one evening, while his crew encored,
He thrummed like mad upon his old guitar
In honour of the maid whom he adored,—
Till as he thrummed, he cracked and crashed the finger-board.

His savage breast was by the music tamed :
And at the breakage, with a rueful ken,
He gazed till he grew sheepish and ashamed,
And swore to touch no mandolin agen
Till he could twang it as the youngest man of men¹!

Now Margarita still was in her teens,
And Ponce desired to be as young as she
(Or but a trifle older) as the means
Of winning her reluctant hand : so he—
From sixty-four—resolved to change to twenty-three².

And I commend him for his keen discretion :
He chose an age for which—I frankly say—
I entertain so fond a prepossession,
That three-and-twenty—could I have my way—
Is just where I would like to stop and always stay.

It is the age when man is at his best,—
When fancy still is young, and wit is bright,
When there are fewest sorrows in the breast,
When life is easy, and its burden light,
And when it is a pleasure still to love and fight.

XI.

My Rover roved through months of rain and sun,
Of fog and mist, of hope and hope deferred,—
As if his quest were never to be done!—
When suddenly the old Hidalgo heard
(One eve at dusk) the chirp of a celestial bird.

¹ The Spanish guitar or mandolin of Ponce's time was popularly called a 'bandurria'—a word which afterwards became 'bandore,' then 'banjore,' and is now 'banjo.'

² Montaigne (who lived and died in the same century with Ponce) wrote that, as a rule, in those days, men at forty had already attained old age; and he quaintly remarked: 'For my part, I believe our souls are adult at twenty, such as they are ever likely to be, and as capable then as ever. A soul that has not by that time given evident earnest of its force and virtue, will never after come to proof.'

For unto troubled men, in times remote,
When faith was simple, and when doubt was rare,
There sang a Bird Unseen—whose heavenly note
(Heard in the heart, inaudible elsewhere)
Gave to the startled listener hope amid despair.

Clear as the carol of a piping thrush,
Loud as the lark's alarum at the morn,
Sweet as the trill that in the midnight's hush
Is warbled from the breast against the thorn,—
So came the note to Ponce, to comfort and to warn.

He listened till he wept. His heart beat hard!
Down on his deck—devoutly on the spot—
He knelt and told his beads with due regard:
For Ponce was what a pirate oft is not—
The Holy Mother Church's faithful son, God wot!

Trusting the viewless bird as if in sight,
He steered his vessel by the flying sound,—
Not veering to the left nor to the right;
And though a hundred rocks shot up around,
Yet safer pilotage no vessel ever found.

The moon was gibbous, yellowing half the sea;
And Ponce, in peering for a place to land,
Espied a solitary coco-tree
That shook its tuft as with a waving hand,
To bid him welcome to that weird and lonely strand.

In confidence that now his goal was near,
He furled his fluttering canvas in its brails,
And clutched, with both his hands, from ear to ear,
His frosty beard—which glistened like his sails,
And sparkled whilst he combed it with his finger-nails.

Casting his anchor by a beetling cliff
That glassed its double in a clear lagoon,
He saw, on gliding shoreward in his skiff,
The waiting Sybil, gazing at the moon,
Holding her cup, as if to grant to him her boon.

XII.

Chinking his purse he cried, 'Let this be thine,
And thine be half of all that I possess—
Pearls from the river, rubies from the mine,
And feathers of the Trogon¹ for thy dress;
For I am rich—a buccaneer, as I confess;
'Indeed, I am a pirate of renown;
But, by the Pyx! and as a man of truth,
I nevermore will plunder ship or town
Except to share the swag with *thee*, forsooth,
If thou wilt give me in exchange the gift of youth!'

XIII.

The ancient Witch had pity in her eyes,—
As if, in looking at the world so long,
She had observed how seldom men are wise,
And how the wisest oft are in the wrong:
And round her blew the sea-breeze—salty, cool, and strong.
Quoth she, 'I value not, O Privateer,
Thy vaunted wealth, whatever its amount:
And if—with shell in hand—I meet thee here,
Not for thy bribe I come, but to recount
Thy many risks in drinking of the Magic Fount.

¹ These brilliant feathers—carmine, green, and gold—all lavishly intermixed—were used by the Montezumas in their royal head-gear. In a description of this unique plumage, Mr. J. G. Wood, the naturalist, says: 'From the feathers of the Trogons, the ancient Mexicans were accustomed to make their justly-famed feather pictures and mantles. For this purpose, thousands of these birds were kept in confinement—a whole army of attendants being maintained for securing their valuable plumage.'

'For, O thou fool, this youth-renewing draught
 Is one that *I*, though I am old like thee,
 And though I keep the Fount, have never quaffed :
 And *thou*—ere quaffing it—be warned by me,
 That to be old—then young—defieth God's decree !

'For hath not Heaven appointed unto man
 That though his days be evil, they be few?
 Is life not wisely bounded by a span?
 O thou who rashly wouldst thy youth renew,
 Drink not the dangerous cup, lest it should work thy rue !'

XIV.

'Thou hag !' De Leon thundered in a rage,
 'Unseal the fount, nor thwart me in my will !
 Give me the draught that rides the old of age !
 Dip me the cup so full that it shall spill !
 And let me drink and drink till I have drunk my fill !'

XV.

The Crone replied with an uncanny voice,
 'I grudge thee not a draught—the fount is free ;
 The springs are triple—thou shalt have thy choice ;
 Taste *one*, or *twain*, or *trine*—I ask no fee—
 But let me teach thee how to judge between the three :

'The first is sweet. And by an instant charm
 It gives thee back thy youthful form and face,
 And puts the pith of youth into thine arm,
 While in thy heart, despite thy youthful grace,
 Thy same old age must still retain its wonted place.

'The next is bitter. Virtue in it lies
 To make thee young agen in heart alone,
 While still the feet of crows shall tread thine eyes ;
 Nor shalt thou be exempt in flesh and bone
 From any of the twinges to which age is prone.

'The third, more wholesome than the other two,
'Is tasteless. Most benignly hath it sprung
To antidote what both the others do:—
For this—the last—if it but touch thy tongue—
Will cure thy fretful age of craving to be young.'

XVI.

'Give me the first!' cried Ponce, with mad delight,
'Let me be young in body, old in mind!
For Strength and Wisdom, if the twain unite,
Must make the man in whom they are combined
The one most lucky mortal among all mankind.'

XVII.

He drank the first,—and never thrill so sweet
Went palpitating through his veins before!
It tingled to his fingers and his feet!
And all at once his hair—from being hoar—
Was turned to golden red, and he was young once more!
And neither when he fought his youthful fight
That freed Granáda from the Moors at last¹,
Nor when the New World hove upon his sight
Whilst he was watching from the Admiral's mast,—
Had Ponce de Leon's pulses quivered half so fast!
All his lumbago vanished from his back!
All his sciatica forsook his groin!
His legs were nimbler than a jumping-jack!
His face was brighter than a new-struck coin!
A brawny youth was he!—in limb—in lung—in loin!

¹ As a young soldier Ponce de Leon had served against the Moors, and had witnessed their final overthrow at Granada. The fall of Granada (and of the Moorish power in Spain) took place on January 2, 1492; and it was on August 3, of the same year, that Columbus sailed from Palos with his first fleet, in search of the New World—sighting San Salvador October 12, and returning to Spain in the spring of 1493.

XVIII.

But now, in his rejuvenated frame,

He felt no youthful passion or desire—

No tender wish for love—no thirst for fame—

No glowing fancy—no poetic fire—

No lofty hope that lured his spirit to aspire.

The new-made giant felt within himself

A young man's blood heating an old man's brain,

Kindling the greeds of Age (its love of Pelf,

Its lust of Power)—those itching fevers twain

That are enough to drive the soundest heads insane.

And like a bull when first the Picador¹

Has of a sudden jabbed him with a prick,

The old Freebooter bellowed with a roar,

And pawed the ground, and gave a lively kick

And grew infuriate with the Spirit of Old Nick!

What would he do with his athletic rage,

Too fierce to guide, too fiery to repress?

The old in their behaviour should be sage:

But Ponce, whose brain was under burning stress,

Now planned a daring scheme of loot and lawlessness.

He paddled to his ship with foaming speed,

And sprang upon his deck, and called his men,

And thundered to them, 'Follow where I lead!'

And drew his sword and slashed the air, as when,

In bygone years, he hewed his way to Boriquenne.

The crew sat huddled round a cask of sherry,

Which in his absence they had gimlet-holed,

And now, with skulls for drinking-cups, were merry,

And did not recognize their Leader old,

But took him for an Urchin who had thither strolled.

¹ At a bull-fight, the function of the Picador is this: Bounding into the ring on horseback, holding his lance under his right arm, he receives the bull's charge by thrusting the lance to the right, while instantly turning the horse to the left.

'Up with the anchor! Up with every sail!'

Cried the mad Captain to the marveling crew;

'Up and away, and whistle for a gale!

We go to fight the Turks! . . . and Tartars too! . . .

Then round the world to rob the Incas¹ of Peru!'

XIX.

'Pretentious Boy!' quoth they, 'Durst thou command

That we shall weigh our anchor, set our sail,

And leave old Ponce de Leon on the land?

Beware, young rogue, lest over yonder rail

We fling thee to a shark, like Jonah to the whale.'

'I am De Leon!' cried their ancient lord,

(Who felt his dignity of age the same,

Or even greater, with his strength restored,

Than when of late his gout had made him lame).

'I am a Lion now, in nerve as well as name!

'And by my beard!—this lion's mane of mine—

I swear, ye rebels—for my wrath is hot—

That I will cut and cleave, from crown to chine,

Each calf among ye—miscreants ill-begot!—

If when I give an order ye obey it not!'

'Thy beard, O Boy!' cried they. 'Now, by Saint Paul!

What sign of beard is on thy peach-bloom face?

O beardless Youth, thou art no man at all!

Thou art some Baby of a giant-race!

Paddle De Leon's skiff back to its landing-place.'

'I am De Leon, changed from age to youth!'

He vainly cried. Whereat they mocked the more,

And bade him 'Go and cut his wisdom tooth!'

And as he hurried off—and plied his oar—

They pelted him with missiles halfway to the shore.

¹ Pizarro's conquest of Peru began in 1524, and was achieved in five years.

Sticks, bolts, and bottles hit his head and back !

His metamorphosed body was so bruised,
And his re-marrowed bones so full of wrack,

And both his bran-new shoulders so contused,
That never had a Christian been so badly used !

XX.

Piqued that his leadership was thrust aside,

Miffed that his dignity was set at nought,
Stung in his person, smarting in his pride,

He hurried to the Crone, and said, distraught,
'The cup thou gavest me hath my confusion wrought :

'My crew, who see no more my wrinkled brow,
Mistake me for a young and smooth-cheeked lad !

O Beldame; dip thy second bowl !—for now,

Though youth is what I wish for—yet, egad !
I want it with the same old shaggy face I had !'

XXI.

The Sybil dipped her shell a second time,

And gave him from an effervescing spring
A draught that pricked him in his chyle and chyme

As if a hundred hornets on the wing
Had each flown down his gullet with a separate sting.

XXII.

White in an instant grew his hair and beard :

But now so young a heart bethumped his breast
That when among his crew he re-appeared,

He styled their recent prank a youthful jest,
And ordered them to dance—he dancing with the rest.

'Dance one and all !' he cried—'Dance for your lives !

Dance till the moon goes down ! Then swim ashore
And coax the Carib maids¹ to be your wives,

And back to Boriquenne return no more !'
Whereat the tipsy tars set up a jovial roar.

¹ The gentle character of the natives whom Columbus found in these islands was set forth by him in quaint words in a letter to Ferdinand

The moon sank smiling at a sight so queer,
And merrily the stars winked at the view ;
While Ponce, who had not danced for many a year,
Now boasted of a leg as good as new,
And undertook to foot a whole fandango through.
You know that this barbaric Carib dance¹
Stirs up the liver in a lively style :
And Ponce—too elderly to skip and prance—
Had pirouetted but a little while
Before he felt a queasy qualminess of bile.
The fierce fandango overtaxed his age :
So on the slippery deck he tumbled down,
And rolled in helplessness and howled with rage,
And winced with cramps and cricks from sole to crown,
And muttered, 'Heave me overboard, and let me drown !'

XXIII.

'Old Man,' they cried, 'thy wits are wild as *his*—
That beardless Boy's—who claimed this beard of thine,
And made his cutlass dangerously whizz,
And spake of cleaving us from crown to chine—
Till we had half a mind to souse him in the brine.'
Quoth he, 'Your beardless Brat of bone and brawn
Who paddled hither and cried "Ship ahoy !"
And leapt on deck, and with his cutlass drawn
Gave word to kill, to burn, and to destroy,
Was certainly a Devil's Imp, and not a Boy.

and Isabella, saying, 'Their conversation is the sweetest imaginable ; they are always smiling ; and so gentle and affectionate are they that I swear to your Highnesses there is not a better people in the world.'

¹ It should be remembered that the fandango was native to the Antilles. It was introduced from the West Indies into Spain as a Caribbean curiosity. Of course, in Ponce's time, this robust and exciting dance had not yet been tempered by Andalusian grace and softness, but was still characteristic of the boisterous frenzy of the aboriginal Porto Ricans. The cachucha, on the other hand, unlike the fandango, was of Moorish origin, and was modulated from the earliest days by the easy rhythm of castanets. Ponce and his sailors danced—not the gentle cachucha—but 'the fierce fandango.'

'So now I bid ye—I, your Captain Ponce—

Haul up the Imp and swing him at the fore,

Or fetch a marlinspike and crack his sconce,

For *I* am *he*—and lest I suffer more,

O comrades, hang me, brain me, drown me—I implore !'

'Old Ponce is in the doldrums !' cried the crew,

'Give him his customary glass of grog—

Which never yet has failed to bring him to :'

But Ponce declined it ! and they stood agog !—

And back he paddled shoreward through a friendly fog.

Reeking with sweat from toiling at his oar,

Gasping for breath, and groaning with a wheeze,

He dragged his wherry up the gritty shore

To where—amid her stony coral-trees—

The Sybil kept her night-watch in the salted breeze.

XXIV.

'O fill for me,' he cried, 'thy final bowl,

And let it countercharm, if so it can,

These cruel changes in my flesh and soul—

For Youth and Age are not, by Nature's plan,

Put both at once together in the self-same man.'

XXV.

Cold was the draught, as if from Lethé's river,

And his teeth chattered at the goblet's brim,

And through his body shiver after shiver

Crept like a palsy, and his face grew grim,

And all his gout came twitching back through every limb.

XXVI.

'Yes, I am now myself agen,' thought he,

And for assurance slapped his shaky thighs !

'I am the same old Ponce I used to be !—

With one experience added—which I prize :

What is Old Age ? It is a blessing in disguise !—

‘For in our Youth we far too fiercely clutch
At fortune, fame, and power: we live aloof
From what is best in life: we grasp too much:
Till Age—that puts our prizes to the proof—
Cares but for love, and home, and hearth, and sacred roof!

‘So were my Pearl to dwell my Chatelaine,
Keys at her girdle—distaff in her hand—
Love in her looks . . . not to be King of Spain!—
Nor Young Apollo of the Olympian band!—
Would I give up a happiness so great and grand!’

XXVII.

Then the old Lion—in the wane of night,
Just as the fire-flies had begun to pale—
Took leave forever of the haggard Sprite,
Who strictly bade him not to tell his tale—
Lest all the world should ever after mock and rail.

He found his crew asleep—whom he awoke
By touching off a loaded culverin:
And some believed the noise a thunderstroke,
While others fancied, from the deafening din,
That Gabriel’s Trump had blown for Judgement to begin.

The bluff old Captain, setting sail agen,
Proved his identity beyond a doubt;
For in his homeward run to Boriquenne
He daily took his grog, and cursed his gout,
And let his pent-up hurricanes of temper out.

Landing in Boriquenne, with head as hoary
As when he started on his love-lorn quest,
Old Ponce had wit enough to keep his story
A secret in his solitary breast—
As being too incredible to be confessed.

XXVIII.

Meanwhile in Boriquenne there had occurred
A gay event that gladdened all the isle—
A nuptial-feast—whereof he had not heard—
And when he heard of it he wept awhile—
And from that misty moment never did he smile!

For *she*—the Pearl his heart was set upon—
His Margarita—whom he hoped to wed—
Had in his absence married a young Don!—
But Ponce forgave them both, and nobly said,
'Be ye my children now—my heirs when I am dead:
'For now I die'¹!—I have lived long enough!—
And Death is welcome—thanks to Him by Whom
Our mortal frame is formed of fragile stuff,
Here to decay, and by a happy doom
To rise to Immortality beyond the Tomb.'

Then Ponce de Leon—as his pulse grew cold—
Held up his hand, and pointing to the sky
Said to the wedded pair, 'Live to be old,
But come at last, and join me by and by
Around the Fountain of Eternal Youth on High!'
His face was beautiful in death (they say);
And now his statue should in gold be cast
To teach a world of Living Fools to-day
How he, the Greatest Fool of ages past,
Could yet outlive his folly, and be wise at last.

XXIX.

Here ends my Lay—though there remains of course
A final doubt which I must now dispel:
So if you ask me from what ancient source
I draw the tale which I have tried to tell,—
Dear friends, the Truth is from the Bottom of the Well.

APPENDIX.



Bimini.

The Fountain of Youth—to which Ponce de Leon made his expedition from Porto Rico in the sixteenth century—was supposed to be at Bimini—an island now familiarly known as one of the Bahama Group, and belonging to the English Government. The first appearance of Bimini, by name, on any map, was on a rough chart which was drawn in 1511 by Queen Isabella's Secretary, Peter Martyr, who had long previously been a personal friend of Columbus, and who had chanced to be in Barcelona April 15, 1493, when the Admiral arrived at that port on returning from his first voyage to the New World. Peter Martyr's imagination had been so fired by his conversations with Columbus, and by the many marvels which were extravagantly narrated by the Admiral's shipmates, that the Queen's literary and susceptible scribe seems to have given a romantic faith and credence at once to the charming report of a fountain in the Caribees, whereof the potent waters could make old men young. At all events, the story so fascinated Peter Martyr that he wrote of it in a letter to Pope Leo X—and not only argued the natural possibility of such a well-spring—but drew a map to show where the healing flood might be wisely looked for until peradventure it should be found. This map has been reproduced in *fac simile*—in the admirable series of West Indian documents edited by Justin Winsor of Harvard University.

The First Landing-Place of Columbus.

Up to the present time, five different islands have claimed to be the San Salvador of Columbus: that is to say, Turk's Island, according to Navarette; Cat Island, according to Irving and Humboldt; Mayaguana, according to Varnhagen; Watling, according to Peschel and Major; finally Samana, according to Fox. A re-examination of these various claims was made by Lieut. J. B. Murdoch, of the United States Navy, who seems to prove (almost conclusively) that the Landfall of Columbus was at Watling. If this decision stands without reversal, Watling's Island (so called after the old buccaneer, John Watling) should change its name, and be hereafter charted as the real Guanahani or San Salvador.

How Ponce de Leon smoked.

He of course used the 'tobago' of the West Indians in their own primitive way. The Carib original of the now universal tobacco-pipe was hardly a pipe at all. It had no bowl. It was a long and tapering stalk, hollowed out by expelling the pith; and it terminated at the smaller end in twin offshoots, or forks, both of which were cut off short, within an inch of their junction, forming by their bifurcation the two prongs of the letter Y. The main stalk—that is to say, the stem of the Y—was half a man's length, or more. A handful of the dried weed

was put into a dish or shell, or into a small heap on the ground, and set on fire; emitting a heavy smoke. Into this smoke the single end of the stalk was thrust by the expectant smoker; who, sitting to windward of the fume, carefully inserted the two prongs—not into his mouth—but into his nose—a prong in each nostril. If his inhalation was vigorous, he soon had his brain full of fumes—pungent and seductive. In fact the Spaniards found them intoxicating.

Ponce's 'Pearl.'

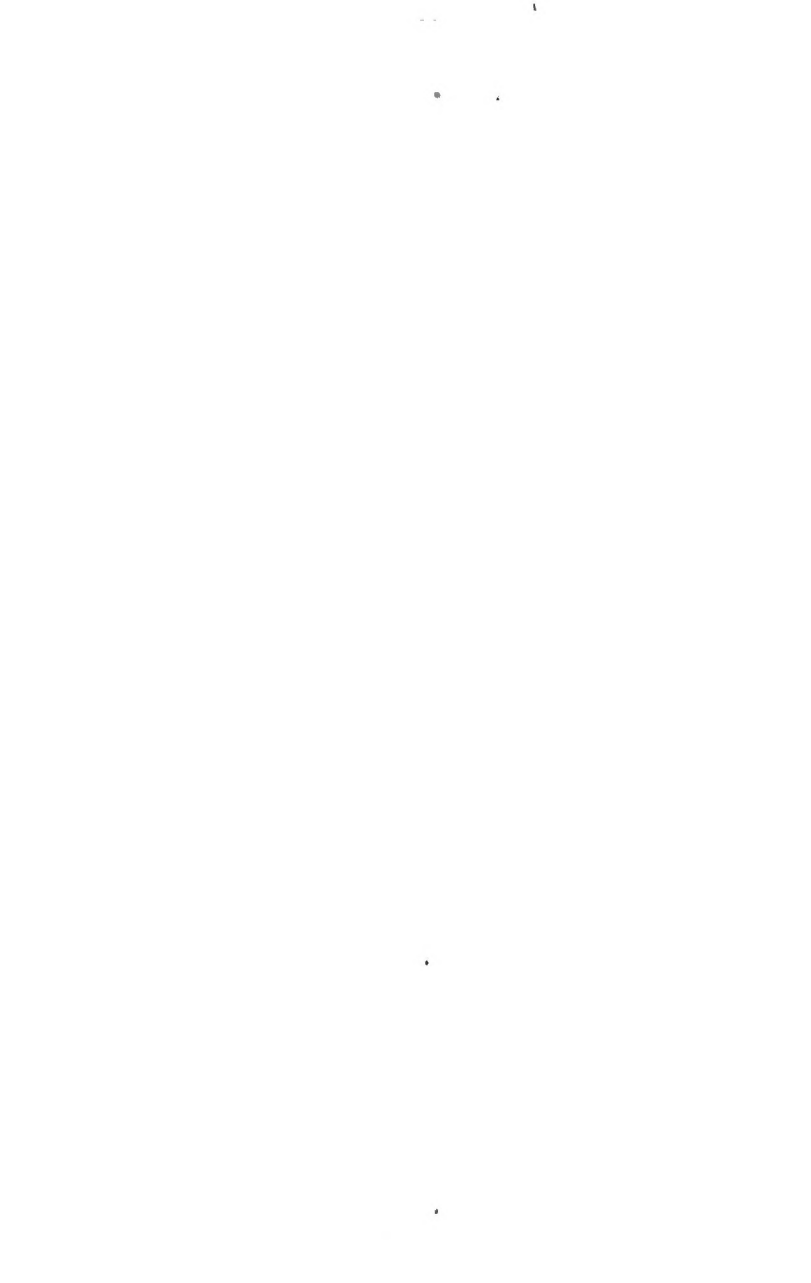
It is not a little singular that the name of Ponce's heroine, meaning—'pearl,' has passed through several European languages with very slight modification of spelling or sound, thus:—Greek, *Μαργαρίτης*; Latin, *Margarita*; Italian, *Margherita*; Spanish, *Margarita*; German, *Margarethe*; French, *Marguerite*; English, *Margaret*.

Veritas est Vanitas Vanitatis.

Of the Nine Muses, Clio is the least to be credited. What is more unhistorical than history? Open a Yankee school-book, and take an illustration. During the first half of the nineteenth century, millions of American school-children (the author of this ballad being one of them) were strictly taught that Ponce de Leon discovered Florida on Easter Sunday, March 27, 1512, and that he gave the country its floral name because Easter lilies were then and there in beautiful bloom. But this sacred date, with its sweet and flowery adornment, must in these later and *fin-de-siècle* days be extirpated from our historic annals: for we are now informed by Mr. Fox—with his myth-destroying mathematics!—that Easter Sunday in the year 1512 did not fall on the 27th of March! Thus it is that history is written—and rewritten—and then *un-written*! This collapse of the old chronology has left the present balladist free to deduce a few new dates from Circumstantial Evidence; to evolve several new incidents from Inner Consciousness; and to give the tale a new moral for the sake of Poetic Justice.

Mr. Gradgrind's View of the Case.

Dismissing this ballad as an extravaganza, and reverting to sober history for authentic facts, the balladist begs to add that the Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris (the largest Library in the world) contains no book or manuscript that confers an indisputable date of birth on Ponce de Leon. There is no certainty that he was born (as Larousse says) in 1460. Nor is the tradition tenable that Ponce was the 'cabin-boy' of the *Santa Maria* in 1492. But the modern authorities all concur in saying that De Leon sailed with Columbus on the Admiral's second voyage, which was in 1493; that twenty years later, Ponce (having meanwhile grown old) undertook his expedition to the Fountain of Youth, but discovered Florida instead, on Easter Sunday, 1513; and that the venerable buccaneer died, in green old age, in 1521. His last illness was painfully aggravated by 'blood-poisoning,' occasioned by the prick of an envenomed arrow that hit him during one of his skirmishes with hostile Caribs. His ashes rest in Cuba—so that Porto Rico contains, not his mortal, but his immortal remains.



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